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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000851

SIPDIS

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BAGHDAD FOR DMCCULLOUGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/14/2019

TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: PRESIDENT YAR'ADUA'S FIRST PRESS
CONFERENCE

REF: A. ABUJA 10

[1](#)B. ABUJA 792

[1](#)C. 08 ABUJA 2292

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter N.S. Pflaumer for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: For the first time since his 2007 election, on May 12, President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua held a press conference, speaking to reporters at the State House Media Center about electoral reform, the recent elections in Ekiti State, fuel scarcity, and the Halliburton scandal. Following closely on the heels of his first newspaper interview, and broadcast by local television networks, the press conference may be a sign that Yar'Adua is trying to combat the widespread perception that he is out of touch and too sick to be in office. He addressed not only some of Nigeria's most pressing issues, but also took time to respond to his critics, and looked stronger and less frail than in recent public appearances. He finished by praising the "vibrancy of the press," which is somewhat ironic given the steps his administration has sometimes taken in the past year to curtail press freedom. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) On May 12, President Yar'Adua held his first formal press conference since being elected in 2007, summoning print and television journalists to the State House Media Center. Coming shortly after his first newspaper interview (April 27, with the daily Guardian), he spoke on a number of issues, including electoral reform, the April 25 gubernatorial elections in Ekiti State, the fuel crisis, and the KBR/Halliburton bribery scandal. Newspaper reports focused mainly on his extensive comments about electoral reform efforts, including his appeal to fellow political elites to embrace free and fair elections. He also called on the National Assembly to pass the seven Electoral Reform Bills he has sent them. He claimed to be implementing 73 of the 83 recommendations made by the Justice Uwais-led Electoral Reform Committee (reftel A), saying that those who expect the implementation of all 83 "have no knowledge of what they are talking about." He also said he had ordered a probe into the violence in the recent elections in Ekiti State (reftel B), and promised to prosecute the guilty, having set up a committee to "bring troublemakers to book."

[1](#)3. (U) Addressing the gasoline scarcity which has created

long lines at fuel pumps throughout Nigeria, Yar'Adua said it was the work of a "mafia" that was "the greatest institutional corruption of the nation." He promised that the scarcity would end within two weeks, and that the Federal Government had set up a committee to investigate the matter. He also spoke about the KBR/Halliburton bribery scandal, pledging that the Federal Government, in the form of a newly-formed committee made up of members of various intelligence and law enforcement agencies, would expose and prosecute those involved. He specifically mentioned having taken "the most critical step by writing to the U.S. Attorney General based on our treaty on Mutual Legal Assistance."

14. (C) COMMENT: The last few weeks have seen Yar'Adua end what might be seen as a two-year long virtual boycott of the press, but we doubt this is the beginning of any sort of regular relationship with the Fourth Estate. To the contrary, Yar'Adua's administration has repeatedly closed television and radio stations and arrested journalists who wrote unfavorably about him or the Peoples' Democratic Party (reftel C, and as recently as the May 12 closure of Adaba 88.9 FM in Ondo State). More likely, Yar'Adua is finally reacting to the widespread view that his illness and naturally slow pace of work have left the Nigerian ship of state without a man at the helm. If his health permits, we may see further appearances in the coming days. We note that if the formation of committees could actually achieve any positive changes in Nigeria, President Yar'Adua's place in history would already be assured. END COMMENT.

15. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.

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